

LOCAL POPULATION STUDIES IN SCHOOLS (I) A CLASSROOM PROJECT IN HISTORICAL DEMOGRAPHY

S. B. Saul

Breckenbeds Junior High School, Gateshead

Having no previous experience of using historical demography in the classroom it seemed sensible to think in terms of introducing it in all third-year classes, i.e. pupils in the age range of 13-14 years in their last year at a junior high school before transfer to a 14+ high school. It was important to introduce it right across the third year because this gave all pupils experience of 'real' history before they moved on to the examination-orientated world of the senior high school. It was thus the last contact with history for many of these pupils; in the senior high school they could find history set against physics, absorbed into social studies, or whatever. In any event, it would be very unlikely that they would have much opportunity of engaging in some historical investigation of however modest a kind. Introducing it right across the third year also had the effect of encompassing the whole ability range (with the exception of pupils undertaking remedial work). Such work would follow on very well from study of the agricultural and industrial changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; thus a useful link would be maintained with the more traditional topics of study, an important point if the pupils were not to regard historical demography as something separate from history. For organisational reasons the work was tackled in the summer term, but this had the added advantage of leaving those who were destined to have no further contact with school history with some sense of the practical nature of historical investigation.

Having taken the decision to introduce some historical demography within the confines of the normal syllabus, perhaps the most difficult and important decision, the next step was to determine the organisational detail. The class-time available was blocked in periods of one hour and ten minutes so activity had to be planned to fit into this pattern. Since group work is an intrinsic part of such activity a 'public-relations' exercise with staff in adjoining rooms is essential. The pupils were to undertake the work **in** the classroom; accordingly it was necessary to bring the sources to them. Whether this is the ideal practice or not can be debated; most teachers will find the issue settled for them by the exigencies of the school timetable, travel difficulties, and other such problems associated with the day-to-day life of a school. That is not to say that visits do not play a valuable role; they must, however, be used to the best advantage and where it is possible to make source materials available within the

classroom this seems a sensible use of time and resources. In the event, photocopies of the original registers were obtained. Since time was of the essence and this was accepted as no more than an introduction to demography, copies were made of the years as follows: baptisms, 1799-1803; burials, 1799-1803; marriages, 1819-25. These particular years in the registers provided information such as occupations and had the added advantage of being decipherable by the pupils without too much difficulty. The use of the same years for baptisms and burials allowed the pupils to become familiar with the **notion** of cross-referencing, by tracing child burials. A twenty-year interval between the baptism and marriage entries offered an opportunity of tracing some individuals from one register to another.

There is no doubt that one of the major problems, and one very often overlooked by the enthusiast or dismissed by the theorist, is that of manipulating the large photocopies and the considerable amount of note-paper involved. It is essential to ensure both order and preservation; this cannot be over-emphasised and is probably the key to effective work in this area. Desks were placed in pairs to provide appropriate work surfaces. The photocopies were divided into bundles on a yearly basis and securely clipped together. Each bundle was numbered so that it was possible to keep track of what was going on and who was doing what. The danger of chaotic bundles of photocopies being left at the end of the first session must be taken into account by the busy teacher, going on to other lessons which also require much preparation. If historical demography is to find a secure place **within** the syllabus it must not threaten to overwhelm work of other sorts; but in order to co-exist happily it requires a great deal of basic classroom organisation. Inevitably, on some photocopies one year ended and a new one began; accordingly a note had to be added to the last sheet of a bundle. Over a period of time it should prove possible to adapt sheets in such a way as to remove this difficulty.

In addition to the photocopies of the registers, a range of resources was provided. From a teaching point of view it was important to display large posters which explained clearly what work was to be undertaken, what procedures were to be followed. Large display posters were made of the history of the parish and were supported by maps, photographs and as much illustrative material as possible. Use was made of local histories to provide background. A visit was made to the church where the original registers were viewed **in situ**. Every opportunity was taken of utilising the surviving elements within the local environment; the gravestones were inspected in a search for links with the register entries and rubbings made of appropriate inscriptions. The various stages of the work and the range of activities were recorded on slides which served as illustrative materials in the classroom and a record for considering improving the exercise in the future.

The study began with a talk on the history of parish registers and an indication of the sort of information to be found in them. This is where the teacher has to use his judgement as to the appropriate detail which can

be introduced, particularly when faced by mixed-ability groupings. The large display posters, or if possible overhead projector transparencies, help to reinforce the introductory remarks, and can provide additional information for those pupils able to go beyond what must necessarily be a simple outline. The pupils were allowed to choose the type of register they wished to use; all those studying one type of register can be grouped in one area of the classroom for convenience. It is sensible to take the opportunity of familiarising pupils with record-office procedure and discipline by insisting that all work is carried out in pencil, and that each sheet is handled carefully and placed face down after use to preserve the order.

Possible headings to be used during the recording of information must be discussed; it is important to allow pupils to suggest their own headings since there is much to be learned from such an experience. Some suggestions will undoubtedly be unworkable and therefore will have to be abandoned; but this all adds to the pupils' experience. When appropriate headings have been devised, they can be displayed prominently on the blackboard or by using an overhead projector. The following have proved the most useful so far:

BAPTISMS 1801

Month	Male	Female	Illegitimate	Father's Occupation

MARRIAGES 1801

Month	No. of marriages	Husband's parish	Wife's parish	Illiteracy

BURIALS 1801

Month	Male	Female	Age at death	

The pupils were grouped in pairs, with one calling out the information for the other to record on notepaper. A more elaborate project would make it worthwhile to produce pro-formas for recording the information. This part of the work requires the teacher to circulate, checking accuracy, offering advice, resolving difficulties, and so on.

When the information has been recorded the next task is to produce bar graphs to show monthly baptisms, marriages, burials, illegitimacy, occupations; the aim being not to produce hard statistical evidence but rather to allow the pupils to appreciate the process, to practise the necessary skills and to see the relevance of such work to social history in

general. The range of tasks can be extended to fit the appropriate ability range; for example, a survey of christian names can be undertaken and a comparison with the christian names of the class be made. By cross-checking with other groups it is sometimes possible to build up a picture of a family group. The graphs are eventually displayed for the whole class to view and discuss. Creative work can be incorporated into the scheme; for example, drawings of the church are made and added to the display. The opportunities of extending the work are immense. Visits to local museums add another dimension to the life of the individuals recorded in the registers. An effective link between the statistics and the general social background is an essential objective of the whole exercise; without such a link each aspect is the poorer.

The aim of such a project as this is not a scholarly exercise; it is to allow pupils to get to grips with historical evidence, and to relate it to their study of history in general. The exercise generates enormous enthusiasm and the pupils are anxious to discover items of unusual interest, such as the fact that a widow had had her infant and two older children baptised on the very same day as her husband's funeral. A fourteen-year-old girl wrote an account of this as if she were the widow in which she showed a considerable degree of emotional understanding. Much of the value of this sort of exercise lies in its very limited nature, that is it does not require a major syllabus reorganisation. Demography is thus incorporated **within** the existing syllabus-constraints. The degree of pupil-interest and the level of performance achieved make the exercise well worthwhile. If the pupils are stimulated into continuing such interests at a future date the teacher can be well satisfied.